

Writing a Great Research Paper: Taking Notes Study Guide

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isbn 1-57385-195-7 · upc 600459195793

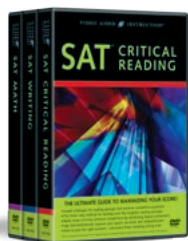
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Introduction

Whether on index cards or in a computer file, clear, organized notes enable you to keep track of helpful resources, remember significant details, recognize important themes, and capture key bibliographic data. This extensive program demonstrates and evaluates several proven note-taking methods that will make drafting, formatting, and polishing your paper much easier and faster!

For easier studying and maximum success, we recommend that you view the program over a number of short sessions: don't try to absorb too much at one time. Review the entire program, or specific sections, as many times as you find necessary in order to master the material.

Perhaps most importantly: Don't forget to take advantage of your "pause" button while viewing the program. Keep plenty of scrap paper handy so you can jot down ideas, work through concepts, and more. And finally, be sure to use the myriad on-screen graphics to take notes for yourself—when you're done, you'll have a notebook you can refer back to again and again.

About Your Instructor

Karl Weber, M.A., is an educator, editor, and bestselling author in fields ranging from business to politics to test preparation. He has worked on books with such noted figures as management guru Adrian Slywotzky, Loews Hotels CEO Jonathan M. Tisch, and President Jimmy Carter.

Part 1: The Philosophy of Note-Taking

Keep your notes complete, clear, understandable, and legible. They must record accurately not only what you read but also why you find it interesting, useful, relevant, and important. When you look at your notes, you should quickly be able to recapture the value of the particular research source being described and see how the information it provides may fit into your paper.

Part 2: Creating a Bibliographic Database

For a book, record:

- The complete name of the author/editor, last name first
- The title and subtitle of the book
- The edition of the book, if any
- The place of publication
- The name of the publisher
- The date of publication
- The library call number (for your reference)
- The relevant page numbers

For a periodical article, record:

- The complete name of the author/editor, last name first
- The title of the article
- The title of the periodical
- The volume and issue number of the periodical, if any
- The date of publication
- The column and page number on which the article begins

For a web page, the information you should record varies, depending on the nature of the material. If you are using a web page that contains an archive of a printed publication, you need the same kinds of data you would record for a periodical article:

- The complete name of the author/editor, last name first
- The title of the article
- The title of the periodical
- The volume and issue number of the periodical, if any
- The date of publication
- The column and page number on which the article begins
- The web page address (URL)
- The date on which you accessed the article

If you're referring to a web page that is not part of a periodical archive, then jot down the following information, which will allow anyone who reads your paper to track down the web page independently:

- The complete name of the author/editor, last name first, of the article or other item you are interested in
- The title of the article
- The date on which the article was posted (if available)
- The name of the website
- The name of the organization sponsoring the site
- The web page address (URL)
- The date on which you accessed the article

Part 3: What to Capture: *Facts and Ideas*

Of course, a really great research paper is one that offers interesting, significant ideas that are supported by powerful, compelling facts. And how do you keep track of the facts and ideas you discover so you can effectively develop and articulate your own ideas? That's the purpose of note-taking.

Remember: Note-taking is not about gathering raw material and dumping it on paper for later study. It's about reading, analyzing, thinking about, and digesting information as you read and then capturing that information in a form that will make it easy to use later on. This means that you should be working to understand and interpret the books, articles, and other materials you are reading. Rather than trying to capture everything an author says, your note-taking should be selective and should focus on ideas that relate specifically to your topic.

As a general rule, your notes should capture:

- Facts that are not common knowledge and that help to answer the key question on which your paper is focused, either strengthening, weakening, clarifying, or modifying your working thesis
- Ideas—that is, interpretations, opinions, analyses, or theories—that are relevant to your question and your working thesis, and with which you either agree or disagree

What should your notes include? Well, that will vary depending on your research question and sources, but be on the lookout for:

- Specific facts that exemplify, illustrate, or otherwise add support to elements of your working thesis (names, dates, places, events, trends, etc.—including all of the details of who, what, when, where, why, and how)
- Specific facts that help to “poke holes” in alternative theses (names, dates, places, events, trends, etc.—including all of the details of who, what, when, where, why, and how)
- Paraphrasings of other writers' ideas that relate to your working thesis
- Exact quotations of other writers' ideas that relate to your working thesis (only when the author's phrasing is distinctive, memorable, or especially powerful)
- Comments about writers' ideas that relate to your working thesis (simple remarks that serve to summarize your observations about a particular text)

As you take notes from any new source, be sure to add it to your bibliographic database (see **Part 2**). And remember to include the relevant authors, titles, and page numbers within your notes—so you'll know which notes came from which sources!

Part 4: Alternative Note-Taking Techniques

Don't just photocopy or print out your source materials and move on, intending to read and analyze them later when you sit down to write your first draft! You should read and analyze your source materials right now as you locate them, taking notes all along.

Do label all of your photocopies and printouts with information that will make them instantly identifiable later: e.g., author, title, and date.

Do save yourself some time transcribing bibliographical data by photocopying the title and copyright pages of books and printing out pertinent data from library catalogs, periodical indexes, and websites.

Do organize any computerized notes into different files and folders, arranged hierarchically by subtopic, and give your files and folders intuitive names. And save often and back up your work!

Here's a tip: Copying-and-pasting (or cutting-and-pasting) text that you highlight can make it easier to capture complex web page addresses, quote a long passage of text, and rearrange words, phrases, and sentences. In most software programs, including Microsoft Word™ and most web browsers, you can usually use the following keyboard shortcuts for these commands:

- **Ctrl-C to Copy** the highlighted text—that is, copying it and leaving it intact. (You use your mouse to highlight the text you want to copy, depress the “Ctrl” key on your keyboard, and then, with the “Ctrl” key still depressed, press the “C” key. Then release both keys.)
- **Ctrl-X to Cut** the highlighted text—that is, copying it and deleting it. (You use your mouse to highlight the text you want to copy, depress the “Ctrl” key on your keyboard, and then, with the “Ctrl” key still depressed, press the “X” key. Then release both keys.)
- **Ctrl-V to Paste** the text that you already Copied or Cut—that is, inserting it where your cursor is. (You use your mouse to position your cursor where you want the Copied or Cut text to appear, depress the “Ctrl” key on your keyboard, and then, with the “Ctrl” key still depressed, press the “V” key. Then release both keys.)

Mac OS® users: Use the “⌘” key instead of the “Ctrl” key when following the above instructions.

Some software programs, including Microsoft Word, even allow you to drag-and-drop highlighted text from one place in a document to another. This can make reorganizing your prose easier still; just be careful that your sentences all make sense when you're done!

Also, when you're taking computerized notes, don't be limited to using Microsoft Word or other software programs that specialize in creating office documents—think “outside the box” and experiment with other programs. For example, you could try using Microsoft Excel™ to design a spreadsheet of your notes... or Microsoft PowerPoint™ to create a set of slides that can act like “virtual index cards”... or you could try one of the many other software programs that actually specialize in research and note-taking, including:

- Zotero [zotero.org]
- EndNote® [endnote.com]
- Sente [thirdstreetsoftware.com]

Whichever note-taking method you choose, be sure to record the correct source information on every single note—that way, there will be no chance of mixing up your notes and sources later!

Part 5: Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Commenting

But what do you write down in your notes when you encounter a source that seems relevant to your research? Here's some advice...

In your notes, you should quote directly only when the author's phrasing is distinctive, memorable, or especially powerful. Remember to use quotation marks in your notes, so you'll remember to use them in your paper!

In most cases, you should paraphrase more often than quoting. When paraphrasing, you want to absorb the meaning of the source and then restate it, precisely and accurately, but totally in your own words. Without getting too bogged down in the phrasing, try to craft sentences that are succinct and effective—if they're good enough, they might just get “dropped into” your first draft!

You should comment to record: an observation or an idea you might have about the source material; a reminder to you about how you might use it; an indication of how and why you agree or disagree with the source; or a question for further study and research. Always be careful to differentiate your own comments from quotes and paraphrases—use a different colored ink or square brackets to make your own words stand out from the rest of the note.

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A final reminder: It's tempting to omit quotation marks in your note-taking—especially when you're trying to jot down lots of notes in a mad flurry of activity as the library is about to close. But be warned: If you skip adding those quotation marks now, you might forget about them later, and you could put those words in your paper as if they were your own. That's a form of inadvertent plagiarism that is all too easy to commit—but it's just as easy to avoid.